

# From Crisis to Crisis

Philip Hunt

**It is very difficult to find words of encouragement about the merger of Monitor and the NHS Trust Development Authority, except to say there will be one fewer dysfunctional organisation in a wholly dysfunctional system.**

Sadly for patients, the NHS is lurching from crisis to crisis as performance slips, finances worsen and the Lansley regulated market/competition model is increasingly ignored. It has left a huge vacuum with little system leadership and precious little common sense.

Certainly, these two organisations have little to be proud of. In principle, their roles were similar: ensuring NHS provider organisations were clinically and financially sustainable. The record of both organisations has been dismal. It is hard to think of any 'success' they have had. Most insiders believe they just make things worse.

**The usual tactics of blaming and shaming a struggling organisation and sending in highly paid consultants has not worked. To be fair, they were faced with the impossibility of reconciling safety priorities and high-quality care with financial responsibility, performance targets and growing population pressures.**

However, given that backdrop, struggling organisations were surely entitled to expect some support, or at least sympathy from these hugely expensive quangos that, it was assumed, had all the answers. Instead of support, organisations were offered a culture of impossible demands, incredibly short-term expectations and overbearing and hostile interventions from very

well-paid 'experts' who often actually had very limited experience of direct operational management.

**The difficult situation descended into farce when Monitor set out to police the use of agency staff by employing temporary staff.**

The suggestion is that this new NHS Improvement body will be fundamentally different. It will bring support to achieve success instead of presiding over failure and exit – highly anti-competitive! It will not merely look at individual NHS organisations in isolation; it will have to look at a wider picture across a wider area, although there is no mechanism with which to do this.

It will also look at system issues such as commissioning and regulation – again, way outside its obvious remit.

**This is all very sensible, and a major departure, but there is very little indication that the new body will change, though clearly its new Chairman, Ed Smith, is nobody's pushover and I am well aware of the excellent things he has done at the University of Birmingham.**

It is dispiriting that this merger essentially marks the end of the NHS foundation trust movement. The aim of some degree of financial independence

has been lost in the queue for bailouts; the attempt to have stakeholder governance and organisations much closer to local communities has been overtaken by the return of strong top-down direction.

**This is surely the wrong direction to go. We need greater links into communities. All NHS providers should have the foundation trust stakeholder governance model, accepting varying degrees of earned autonomy as necessary.**

Monitor proved to be a useless advocate for the idea of local governance; it hardly acknowledged governors at all. Instead, it was obsessed with market ideology.

Ultimately, the merger of Monitor and the NHS Trust Development Authority evidences the bizarre world we live in, where ministers are micromanaging the NHS within a context of market-orientated legislation.

**I suspect this new organisation will not be with us for long! “**

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*With acknowledgements to NHS Providers for whom this article was originally written.*